

Ghosts in the Text: Writing Technologies and the Politics of Reactionary Autoimmunity in Houellebecq's Works

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In 2016, soon after the publication of *Soumission*, Michel Houellebecq received the Frank Schirmacher prize. His speech on the occasion, which started by exposing the media's supposedly hostile attitude towards him¹, went on to analyse the position of reactionaries among which he claimed to be rightfully counted in Lindenberg's *Le Rappel à L'ordre*:

Un souverainiste, ou toute personne hostile à la dissolution de son pays dans un espace fédéral européen, est un réactionnaire. Quelqu'un qui défend l'utilisation de la langue française en France, ou de toute langue nationale dans son propre pays, qui s'oppose à l'utilisation universelle de l'anglais, est un réactionnaire. Quelqu'un qui se méfie de la démocratie parlementaire et du système des partis, qui ne considère pas ce système comme la fin ultime de l'organisation politique, qui aimerait qu'on donne davantage la parole à la population, est un réactionnaire.²

This article will study the proximity between Houellebecq's extra-textual declarations in sync with current French far right ideologies recently analysed by scholars such as Williams (2018), Sweeney (2013), Michallat (2007) and the autoimmune relationship to language which, I argue, is observable within his literary texts.³ By autoimmunity, I am referring to what Derrida described as "that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, "itself" works to destroy its own protection".⁴ Extending this metaphor to the "reactionary" treatment of Houellebecq's text to writing technologies and neoliberalism, I argue that Houellebecq's paradoxical position in relation to different forms of mediation are

¹ See Michel Houellebecq's claim that "Il y a beaucoup de journalistes français qui se réjouiront très sincèrement de ma mort" in "Schirmacher-Preis, Michel Houellebecq, 26.9.2016", <http://schirmacher-stiftung.de/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Dankesrede_original_Houellebecq_26.9.16.pdf>, p.2. [last accessed 27/01/2019]

² Houellebecq, "Schirmacher-Preis, Michel Houellebecq, 26.9.2016", p. 4. [last accessed 27/01/2019]

³ The case for the growing proximity between Houellebecq's extra-textual interventions and his fictional work is convincingly examined by Russel Williams in "Uncomfortable Proximity: Literary Technique, Authorial Provocation and Dog Whistles in Houellebecq's Fiction", forthcoming Houellebecq special issue, *Modern & Contemporary France* (2019), DOI: 10.1080/09639489.2018.1557128. See also Sweeney and Michallat's analysis of Houellebecq's reactionary discourse in "Modern life is still rubbish Houellebecq and the refiguring of 'reactionary' retro", in *Journal of European Studies*, 37(3), 313–331 and Carole Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides — A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida", trans. byh by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, revised by Jacques Derrida in French, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 94 (85-136).

auto-reactive attempts to thwart the very channels of provocation his works rely upon. The aim of this article is to show how a careful reading of the techno-scientific worldview represented in his fictions can illuminate the paradox of Houellebecq's willingness to participate in the society of spectacle while being one of its most fervent detractors. While past scholarly analysis have focused on this phenomenon in terms of the wider commercial strategy surrounding his works, there has been no attempts to situate this phenomenon within the ideological field of contemporary far-right politics' strategy to combat the neoliberal system in which "plus nous participons/ plus nous sommes captifs".⁵ This essay will argue against a simple reduction of this attitude to commercial concerns to analyse the wider ideological strategy at work in Houellebecq's complicit disavowal of various technologies, or techniques, of mediation in the context of his novels, including those pertaining to literature. Far from a simple political indictment of his works, this essay aims to show how a careful analysis of Houellebecq's fictions can shed light on the fact that the reactionary, autoimmune strategy of the contemporary far right is not simply antithetical to the liberal way of life which it seeks to undermine, but is itself a product of the very techno-scientific and biopolitical development of neoliberalism which thrives on the free participation of individuals in increasingly sophisticated surveillance systems.⁶ The article will begin by analysing the techno-scientific vision of the world consistently deployed in his early works before focusing on what Derrida described as the reactionary mechanisms of autoimmunity at work in his textual representations of the media and its techno-scientific apparatus. Lastly, it will frame his fictions' attitude to language within the wider discourse giving primacy to voice over sound, presence over absence while showing how this attitude to language is enmeshed in his wider anti-feminist discourse on "natural women".⁷ Overall, this essay will show how a careful analysis of Houellebecq's fictions could help us understand the extent to which contemporary reactionary discourses are rooted on the extension of neoliberalism to the private and biological spheres of life.

⁵ Houellebecq, *Le Sens du combat*, in *Poésies* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), p. 65.

⁶ See recent analysis on the symbiotic relationship between online technologies and alt_right strategies: Andrew Jakubowicz, "Alt_Right White Lite: Trolling, Hate Speech and Cyber Racism on Social Media", in *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: an Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2017), 41-60; Jessy Daniels, "The Algorithmic Rise of the "alt-right"", in *Contexts*, 17, 1 (2018), 60-65.

⁷ Carole Sweeney, "Natural Women? Anti-Feminism and Michel Houellebecq's Plateforme", *Modern & Contemporary France*, Volume 20 (2012), Issue 3, 323-336.

Humanism, Post-Humanity and Writing

The metaphor of the 'ghost in the machine' has become a well-known shortcut for explaining Descartes' mind-body distinction.⁸ Rooted in the slave-master dichotomy since Aristotle, political fictions on the machine-human relationship in western culture tend to parabolise the unstable hierarchy between humanity and technology, man and robot, master and slaves. This tale, or parable, is made central in Houellebecq's works by the place attributed to the evolution of both writing as a technology and digital technologies in his texts. Houellebecq's fiction on "cloning", indeed, lay bare the contours of a world where both writing and the re-writing of life threaten at all times to overrule the possibilities of representation.

In this ideologically charged context, to speak of Houellebecq in the same sentence as the late-twentieth century concept of *écriture* seems anathema to his work's apparent will to mirror the techno-scientific ideology of its age. Like other authors from his generation such as Francois Bon, Houellebecq is a writer acutely aware of the conditions of material production surrounding his medium, as his essays and early novels testify. However, unlike his contemporary, it is in a clear epistemological rupture with the literary avant-gardes of the twentieth century such as the Nouveau Roman that Houellebecq seems to situate his works: "Je n'ai pas pu, pour ma part, assister sans un serrement de cœur à la débauche de techniques mise en œuvre par tel ou tel "formaliste-minuit" pour un résultat final aussi mince. [...] Au cours d'une conversation littéraire, lorsque le mot d'"écriture" est prononcé, on sait que c'est le moment de se détendre un peu."⁹ While Houellebecq's extra-textual interventions seem to deride formalist concerns as inconsequential, it would be a mistake to read him on the terms he sets here. Indeed, if as noted by Marek Bienczyk, one can read in Houellebecq's texts a suspicion and defiance towards language, it is only by taking his writing seriously that one will be able to analyse its autoimmune strategy.¹⁰

⁸ See for instance: Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine* (New York: Hutchinson & Co, 1967) and Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s", in *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 7-46.

⁹ Michel Houellebecq, "Lettre à Lakis Prodiguis", in *Interventions 2: Traces* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), 151-156 (pp. 153-154).

¹⁰ Marek Bienczyk, "Dimanche dernier à Varsovie avec Michel Houellebecq", in *L'Atelier du roman*, numéro 11 (1997), 134-135.

In *Foi et savoir*, Derrida describes autoimmunity as the safeguarding mechanism with which an entity or discourse which believes to be infiltrated with a threatening other reacts against itself. This article posits that Houellebecq's adverse attitude to literary and technological forms of mediation which his works and literary fame rely upon, as well as his portrayal of Western society as weak and defeated, constitute autoimmune attempts to thwart the pluralising effects of liberalism he perceives to be at the root of western culture's decline. From the start of his literary career, Houellebecq has been a writer in a struggle with a neo-liberal system supported by communication technologies. His suspicion towards the techno-scientific language of modernity is not only manifested, but theorised quite consistently since his first novel *Extension* (1994) and "Approches du désarroi" first published in 1995:

Ainsi, la chair du monde est remplacée par son image numérisée; l'être des choses est supplanté par le graphique de ses variations. [...] Libéré des entraves que constituaient les appartenances, les fidélités, les codes de comportement rigides, l'individu moderne est ainsi prêt à prendre place dans un système de transaction généralisées [...].¹¹

This passage of "Approches" describes the ways in which the techno-scientific society in which many of Houellebecq's characters evolve traps mankind in the dehumanising system of global capitalism under the progressive guise of humanism. The first part of this essay will consist in showing that the analysis of techno-scientific society exposed by Houellebecq above is quite consistently theorised in his early works.

La Possibilité d'une île (2005) can indeed be seen as closing the cycle of a dialogical dystopia where communication between human beings is trapped within a pseudo-progressist ideology of language as information, reducing communication and relationships to their less phatic, most functional parameters. Houellebecq's apparent distaste for humanist discourse, or any other discourse on the subject of human rights, far from contradicts his reticence towards digital technologies. Intuitively, Houellebecq's fictions reveal that as technologically advanced as they are, digital technologies and gene editing are firmly anchored within an enlightened, humanist tradition of perfectibility. As Sloterdijk notes in his "Rules for a Human Zoo: A Response to the *Letter on Humanism*": "The latent message of humanism, then, is the taming of men. And its hidden thesis is: reading the right

¹¹ Michel Houellebecq, "Approches du désarroi", *Objets Perdus*, (Paris: Lachenal & Ritter, 1995), 61–67. Later published in *Interventions* ", 23–45.

books calms the inner beast.”¹² In the genetic rewriting of life which is most vividly described in *La Possibilité*, mimesis, or the symbolic reproduction of life, has been almost entirely subjugated in the digital re-encoding of biological reproduction, echoing Houellebecq’s techno-scientific conspiracy above. This genetic rewriting of life is also underscored in Sloterdijk’s observation that: “reading and breeding have more to do with each other than cultural historians are able or willing to admit.”¹³ The clones of *La Possibilité*, clearly, are not identical to their human predecessors: instead, they are, or represent, the story of humanity’s perfection and the taming of their animality through technological and cultural reprogramming.¹⁴ What is more, their way of life, which consists in reading their predecessors’ notes and commenting on them, is devoid of face-to-face human interaction, as they solely communicate among them via a computer network.

So why, if not to calm an inner beast which has been engineered to disappear, are the re-engineered humans of the novel reading and writing? In *La Possibilité*, whose narrative intertwines the memoirs of Daniel 1 and his technologically perfected clones, this question is left open to interpretation, even if the novel seems to offer a scientific explanation for these practices. Daniel 24 writes indeed that reading works as a memory prosthesis for the clones, to palliate: “les tentatives hasardeuses de downloading mémoriel par l'intermédiaire d'un support informatique au profit d'une part du transfert moléculaire direct”. But this pseudo-scientific explanation, like many others in the text, remains unconvincing, if only by the warning by one of Daniel’s 1’s cloned successor at the beginning of the novel urging the reader: “craignez ma parole”.¹⁵

A closer look at the neo-human statements reveals that much of the language used by the clones in *La Possibilité* is absorbed in the pseudo-scientific speeches dictated by the Sœur suprême. While the clones continue to write their lives in the forms of memoirs, a careful study of their language shows that the function of writing acts as a technology of

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹³ Peter Sloterdijk, “Rules for a Human Zoo: a response to the *Letter on Humanism*”, trans. by Mary Varney Rorty, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* volume 27, (2009), 12-28 (p. 23).

¹⁴ A theme which I also explored in “Domesticating Hierarchies, Eugenic Hygiene and Exclusion Zones: The Dogs and Clones of Houellebecq’s *La Possibilité d’une île*”, *L’Esprit Créateur* Vol. 52, No. 2 (Summer 2012), 127-140.

¹⁵ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), p. 14.

self-surveillance whose purpose is only to monitor the affect of the clones. Describing the disappearance of laughter in the clones, Daniel 23 writes:

Les notes de mes prédécesseurs, de Daniel2 à Daniel23, témoignent en gros de la même incompréhension. Daniel2 et Daniel3 s'affirment encore capables de reproduire le phénomène, sous l'influence de certaines liqueurs ; mais pour Daniel4, déjà, il s'agit d'une réalité inaccessible. Plusieurs travaux ont été produits sur la disparition du rire chez les néo-humains ; tous s'accordent à reconnaître qu'elle fut rapide.¹⁶

As this passage and others exemplify, the clones' interaction in the novel is presided by the quasi-panoptical gaze of a so-called "sœur suprême", whose guidelines and commands are followed by the clones in religious fashion. Writing in the context of *La Possibilité* is indeed impossible to disassociate from the scriptural dimension at the heart of this new scientific governmentality. In this dystopia of language, the possibility of expressing one's emotions, as is sometimes the case through Marie's poems for example, is immediately absorbed by the scientific ideology presiding these interactions:

L'intelligence permet la domination du monde ; elle ne pouvait apparaître qu'à l'intérieur d'une espèce sociale, et par l'intermédiaire du langage. Cette même sociabilité qui avait permis l'apparition de l'intelligence devait plus tard entraver son développement – une fois que furent mises au point les technologies de la transmission artificielle. La disparition de la vie sociale était la voie, enseigne la Sœur suprême.¹⁷

The justification for cloning described by the "soeur suprême" echo Houellebecq's indictment in "Approches": "Ainsi, la chair du monde est remplacée par son image numérisée; l'être des choses est supplanté par le graphique de ses variations". More than a techno-scientific advance, cloning can thus be read as the logical conclusion to what Houellebecq articulated as the infiltration and contamination of writing technologies into the sphere of intimate and biological relationships in "Approches" and *Extension*. The recourse to science-fiction as a genre in *La Possibilité*, as well as the narrative trope of neohumanism, are thus part of a wider project in H's early works to lay bare the biopolitical apparatus of communication technologies. In this sense, *La Possibilité* tells the humanist story behind so-called posthumanism – only, the idea of perfectibility present in humanism has shifted from an understanding of mankind as a species perfectible through the art of

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

reading, to an understanding of mankind as an entity at risk of infiltration, as a text which can be rewritten. Indeed, while the clones of Houellebecq's *La Possibilité* spend most of their time reading and writing the lives of their predecessors, they appear to have become merely a link, a form of mediation in the technological evolution of language.

The re-writing of genealogical and historical writing, the grammatological upheaval set off by the mode of digital communication and reproduction described above, is not only mirrored in the slow dissolution of human affect and relationship ties in Houellebecq's novels pre-dating *La Possibilité*, but can be observed in the theological undertones which traverse Houellebecq's essayistic voice in *Interventions* (1998). In the essay "Consolation Technique" first published alongside *Lanzarote* (2000), and later re-edited in *Interventions*, the 'fall from grace' of mankind from the progressive humanism of the Enlightenment, that is, anthropocentric vision of the world takes on the appearance of a biblical warning. Take, for example, this passage, where Houellebecq responds to his critics' accusation that his works closely mirror his own life or echo his extra-textual interventions:

Souvenez-vous des paroles du poète:

Le cadavre de Dieu
Se tortille sous nos yeux
Comme un poisson crevé
Qu'on achève à coup de pied.

Vous en serez bientôt là, enfants sans conséquence. Vous serez comme des dieux - et ce ne sera pas tout à fait suffisant. Vos clones n'auront pas de nombril, mais ils auront une littérature nombriliste; vous serez mortels. Votre nombril se couvrira de crasse, et tout sera dit. On jettera de la terre sur votre face.¹⁸

As is often the case, Houellebecq's quasi-theological warning announces, demands even, an act of repentance which the disavowal of modernity and its cultural apparatus his works constitutes. His numerous essays and manifestos can be read as his literary profession of faith, as realist 'interventions' in a society masking its technology of governance with humanistic messages. In this context, Houellebecq astutely reveals the short distance between western society's humanist ideals and the posthuman solutions offered by technology.

If, as Walter J. Ong famously posits in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, writing restructures thought in separating "the knower from the known" to promote

¹⁸ Houellebecq, "Consolation Technique", in *Intervention2*, 209-213, (p. 212).

objectivity, Houellebecq's works narrate a world getting to grips with the possibility of this distinction ending.¹⁹ After all, the possibilities of mutation engendered by writing technologies shape not only the notion of history itself (whether it be individual or collective), but also the domain of the living, and thus of the sciences. As Derrida claims: "On sait moins que jamais ou couper – et à la naissance, et à la mort. Et cela veut dire aussi qu'on ne sait jamais, on n'a jamais su comment découper un sujet".²⁰ In a way that can only be sketched briefly here, the technological writing revolution sensed by structuralists and post-structuralists alike in their attempts to address the question of authorship and the nature of writing in the digital age, are the same as those underscoring Houellebecq's reactionary discourse: what if what was at the centre of writing wasn't quite as human a figure as the subject? What if what was at the centre of writing is the text, endlessly re-writing itself, using authors, subjects, life, as its medium? Technologically speaking, what Houellebecq describes is, of course, a new form of writing which escapes the supposed sovereignty of mankind reified by Enlightenment discourse on human autonomy. In this paranoid vision of techno-scientific language, the machine-like sovereignty of the autonomous, Kantian subject and author of texts, is no longer sovereign, but takes on the appearance of a host, or ghost, in the machine of progress.

Autoimmune Responses

The changes brought to memory and transmission through digital revolution, as we have seen, both encompass and overcome traditional narrative strategies in Houellebecq's works. In *Extension*, similarly to what is sketched in "Approches", the description of developments taking place in the domain of writing technologies are at the origin of many difficulties for our narrator, who also doubles as the author of animal fiction as well as auto-fiction. The perception of a coherent "I" in the text is as it were, continuously undermined by the scattering of self which the targeting of individuals through psychology and marketing engender, turning individuals into "fantômes obéissant du devenir".²¹ Although Houellebecq's texts predate online social networks such as "Facebook" or "Twitter", they sense already the problems which this form of individuation can engender in a democratic

¹⁹ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 43.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Il faut bien manger", ou le calcul du sujet", in *Points de Suspension: Entretiens*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber (Paris: Galilée, 1992), p. 299.

²¹ Houellebecq, "Approches du désarroi", p.41.

context resting on the notion of the individual as a free-thinking, autonomous being. In the social context transformed by new writing and communication technologies, the idea of autonomous subjects is not only undermined by targeted, made-to-measure marketing campaigns based on the data harvesting of individual choices and preferences, but equally, and more radically, by the quasi impossibility to tell stories off this script. With this metamorphosis of writing, operated through a radical reconceptualization of humanity mediated through quasi-exclusive scientific forms of self-knowledge, fiction seems total, totalitarian even, since through cloning writing is capable of rewriting humanity in a quasi-ontological manner.

In *Extension*, the first-person narrator, a computer-programmer, suggests that the art of narrating human lives has become compromised by communication technologies:

Pour atteindre le but, autrement philosophique, que je me propose, il me faudra au contraire élaguer. Simplifier. Détruire un par un une foule de détail. J'y serai d'ailleurs aidé par le simple jeu du mouvement historique. Sous nos yeux, le monde s'uniformise; les moyens de télécommunication progressent; l'intérieur des appartements s'enrichit de nouveaux équipements. Les relations humaines deviennent progressivement impossibles, ce qui réduit d'autant la quantité d'anecdotes dont se compose une vie.²²

As Sweeney, observes, *Extension* barely holds the pre-requisites of its genre.²³ This is perhaps because, as well as being a novel, *Extension* forms the confessions of a writer in the age of digital communication. *Extension* acts as an invitation, in the first person narrative, to face the potential failures of a literary genre to survive the cultural rewriting of its tool. But this confession can also be read differently as an invitation for speech, of 'franc-parlé', to return on writing. If, as noted by Ong, "by keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle", then the directness and honesty of Houellebecq's works coupled with his disavowal of literary technique could be seen to operate as a form of autoimmune reaction - a revenge of the spoken over technologically developed written languages of communication.²⁴ This would make sense in a context where Houellebecq's various essayistic "interventions" seem to situate knowledge within the context of a capitalist, neoliberal struggle. Houellebecq's essayistic interventions

²² Michel Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (Paris: Editions Maurice Nadeau, 1994), p. 16.

²³ Carole Sweeney, "And Yet, Some Free Time Remains", *Journal of Modern Literature*, 33: 4 (Summer 2010) 41-56 (p. 43).

²⁴ Walter J. Ong, p. 43.

then, can be seen to be clearly anchored in a wider distrust with the artificial distance of literary mediation and tele-scientific techniques.

The narrator of *Extension* seems to have plenty of motives for seeking to obtain revenge on current models of communication. Among the failures mentioned, *Extension* is a tale of writing, missed connections and solitude in an age of digital transformations. The paroxysm of *Extension*'s satire of communication is reached when, towards the end of the novel, the narrator, having suffered a nervous breakdown, is encouraged to speak to a psychiatrist, where he asked to put into words his own suffering as a way, evidently, to tame his own desire for love and friendship. Here again, the written word, not only in the form of a social contract between doctor and patient prohibiting sexual relations, but in the shape of analysis, seemingly interferes with the desire for the narrator to find companionship and physical intimacy. He bitterly notes: "Sans doute est-ce qu'aujourd'hui je poursuis une vague existence dans une thèse de troisième cycle, au milieu d'autres cas concrets. Cette impression d'être devenu l'élément d'un dossier m'apaise."²⁵ In *Extension*, writing already replaces other, more phatic and emotional means of communication, a theme which reaches its paroxysm in the cloning process of *La Possibilité*, where all feelings have been edited out of the neo-humans.²⁶ In the novel, the social transformation and rationalisation of psychic life into information by the psychologist acts as a primer for the narrator's desire to disappear into the seemingly isolating, distancing matrix of the text re-imagined in *La Possibilité*.

Houellebecq's autoimmune relationship to writing, portrayed here as the vector of an abstracted, idealized social reality, is nowhere more explicit than in his essay: "Prise de contrôle sur numéris". In this context, the essay's narrator is seen embodying a character on the then 'Minitel Rose', an online meeting space designed to facilitate sexual and romantic encounters. Screen shots of the senders' messages are inserted in the essay, allowing the reader to read what is being posted by others alongside the running commentary of the narrator. For instance, on one of the screenshots the narrator can read the following message from a so-called Annie: "JF 30A 170 95 70 90 BRUNE AU CV LONG CH DIA OSE AVEC

²⁵ Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, p. 150.

²⁶ It is interesting to note that linguistically, writing is considered to be usually a less phatic form of communication compared to speech. See Peter Elbow, "The Shifting Relationships between Speech and Writing", *College Composition and Communication*, 36: 3 (Oct., 1985), 283-303 (p. 3).

CPL H F ET POURQUOI PAS RENCONTRE SI DESIR MUTUEL”.²⁷ The narrator's running commentary, meanwhile, ponders the digitalization of human life which he is witnessing, echoing the scientist's statement in *La Possibilité* : “l'être humain, c'est de la matière plus de l'information”.²⁸ Echoing such a definition of human life, the narrator of “Prise de contrôle” notes: “Sur ces bases, une femme pourrait être codée sur 14 caractères, un homme sur 12 [...]. Les avantages du système apparaissent évidents en termes de simplicité, de fiabilité, de rapidité de traitement des informations”.²⁹ The narrator's statement is quickly followed by an act of revenge in the form of online sabotage: “J'opte finalement pour une stratégie de brouillage simple et je recopie un virus furtif sur le noyau de routage des dépêches; il devrait perturber les transmissions pendant quelques jours en générant un fort débit de pseudo-messages aléatoires.”³⁰ The terms “brouillage” is used again at the end of the text: “Je prends l'engagement de contribuer à répandre massivement l'utilisation des techniques de brouillage, et de divulguer à quiconque souhaitera en faire usage les principales méthodes de destruction et de piratage des réseaux”.³¹ In the scriptural battle narrated by in “Prise de Contrôle”, “numéris” is, more than a system of digital retranscription of language, a technique for archiving and organizing life on rationalised criteria, for which human encounters are a mere pretext. In this context, the text is seen as a web in the threatening sense of the term - a digital crucible in which humanity's data is being re-encoded following the progressist, humanist agenda which will form the selective eugenicism in *La Possibilité*. The proximity between narrator and author in the essay form allows Houellebecq to articulate his literary and authorial strategy within this context quite clearly. As the Latin etymology of the word “intervention” suggests (“an interposing, a giving security”), Houellebecq’s literary interventions aim to thwart the very channels of liberalism which the very existence of his political and literary provocations rely upon. But at the same time, this struggle against neoliberal discourse all too often betray his readiness to seek immunity at the cost of other freedoms.

²⁷ Houellebecq, “Prise de contrôle sur numéris”, in *Rester vivant et autres textes* (Paris: Librio, 1999), 31-38 (p. 32).

²⁸ Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île*, p. 240.

²⁹ Houellebecq, “Prise de Contrôle sur Numéris”, p. 35.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

A Moral Architecture of Writing and Presence

Everywhere in Houellebecq's first novel's *Extension*, as we have seen, the voice of the narrator reflects on the development of writing as a technology which conditions the capacity for the narrator to tell his story. But the condition of this telling is itself enveloped in the historical mutations experienced by writing as a technology. Namely, in the grammatological paradigm shift described by Houellebecq, the effectiveness of communication prevails on the possibilities of expression, reflection and detachment which writing affords. The historical moment narrated by *Extension*'s computer programmer is one where writing has been transformed into a technology of transfer or exchange rather than a tool through which humans can objectively reflect on their human condition and historical becoming.

It is hardly surprising to find, in this context, a constant questioning of the nature of 'selfhood' in the Houellebecq's fictional texts. In this passage of *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998) Bruno, a literature professor and amateur writer, and Michel, a genetic scientist who will shortly transform the future of humanity by rewriting its genetic code, Michel gives his brother a scientific explanation for his idea of self:

Tu as des souvenirs de différents moments de ta vie, résuma Michel, ces souvenirs se présentent sous des aspects divers; tu revois des pensées, des motivations ou des visages. Tu as une conscience de ton moi [...] En tant qu'individu isolé, persévérant dans l'existence un certain laps de temps, soumis à une ontologie d'objets et de propriétés, tu n'as aucun doute sur ce point ; on doit nécessairement pouvoir t'associer une histoire consistante de Griffiths.³²

In this passage, similarly to Houellebecq's essays in *Interventions*, Michel seems to directly measure literary discourse with scientific discourse. In reality, as carefully demonstrated by Laurence Dahan-Gaida in her analysis of the impact of quantum non-seperability on the narrative flow of the novel, a careful reading of *Les Particules* can establish that: "L'histoire des deux demi-frères est moins celle de deux individus séparés, que la reconstitution d'un mouvement historique global à partir de deux emplacements ontologiques interdépendants."³³ Beyond the domain of quantum mechanics described by Dahan-Gaida,

³² Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), p. 66.

³³ Laurence Dahan-Gaida, "La fin de l'histoire (naturelle): Les particules élémentaires de Michel Houellebecq", *Histoires naturelles*, 73 (Fall 2003), 93-114 (p. 110).

the epistemological revolution operating in the scientific domain described in *Les Particules* and *La Possibilité* meets and profoundly affects the novel through the revolution operated within the domain of writing, “condition de l'épistème” as argued by Derrida.³⁴ *Les Particules* does not oppose the objectivity of science and the creative function of literature, but the fiction of their historical, ontological division, revealed through a historical re-evaluation of writing. At the crossroad of biology and fiction, this rewriting of the world is framed by a new consciousness of the “I” as re-encodable text, to the extent that the illusion of a coherent “I” is literally torn apart in the novel.

In *Les Particules*, the revolution which Michel observes through the medium of DNA is thus a writing revolution in the cultural as well as technological sense of the term: a re-writing and refining of the humanist function of writing as a tool of self-domestication. Echoing Houellebecq's satire of information society in *Extension* and “Approches”, the clones observe in *Les Particules* that the new technologies of information further the illusion of a separation between objects, thereby accentuating a separation, or disconnection, of man from man. Indeed, the narrative voice of Michel's journal professes: “La pratique du bien est une liaison, la pratique du mal une déliaison. La séparation est l'autre nom du mal; c'est, également, l'autre nom du mensonge. Il n'existe en effet qu'un entrelacement magnifique, immense et réciproque.”³⁵ Both the clones and Michel seem to moralize the relationship between presence and absence, sign and referent throughout the novel. The world of separation described here is in many ways articulated by the structures of ideology of language which, Derrida observes in *De la Grammatologie*, are berated by Rousseau in his *Origines de la langue*. This discourse also, I want to argue, underscore what Sweeney described as the “anti-feminist discourse” underlying his novels.³⁶

For Rousseau, Derrida states, writing is: “une violence faite à la destinée naturelle de la langue: 'les langues sont faites pour être parlées, l'écriture ne sert que de supplément à la parole'”.³⁷ In “Rester Vivant”, Houellebecq gives a similar account of the origins of language: “A partir d'un certain niveau de conscience, se produit le cri. La poésie en dérive.

³⁴ Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, p. 12.

³⁵ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 302.

³⁶ Sweeney, “Natural Women? Anti-Feminism and Michel Houellebecq's *Plateforme*”, *Modern & Contemporary France*, Volume 20 (2012), Issue 3, 323-336.

³⁷ Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1967) p. 207.

Le langage articulé, également.”³⁸ While Houellebecq does not theorize the role of writing in this context, this passage illustrates the primacy of sound over sign in his thought. It seems, then, that similarly to Derrida’s interpretation of Rousseau’s position on writing: “il y a donc une bonne et une mauvaise écriture : la bonne et naturelle, l’inscription divine dans le cœur et l’âme ; la perverse et l’artificieuse, la technique, exilée dans l’extériorité du corps.”³⁹ While the forms of writing prevalent in the ideology of information seem to further the suffering of the narrator in *Extension*, in “Rester Vivant”, poetry is enunciated as the form where the suffering of separation can be articulated.

The similarity between Rousseau's understanding of the relationship between speech and the written word does not end in the belief of the primacy of sound over writing. In “Rester Vivant”, the genealogy of language claiming the cry as its origin is immediately followed by a scene involving a mother abandoning her child:

Henri a un an. Il gît à terre, ses couches sont souillées; il hurle. Sa mère passe et repasse en claquant des talons dans la pièce dallée, cherchant son nouveau soutien-gorge et sa jupe. Elle est pressée d'aller à son rendez-vous du soir. Cette petite chose couverte de merde, qui s'agite sur le carrelage, l'exaspère. Elle se met à crier, elle aussi. Henri hurle de plus belle. Puis elle sort.

Henri est bel et bien parti dans sa carrière de poète.

Narratively speaking, the lack of the mother's presence is what seems to justify the technical intervention which writing, in the form of poetry, tries to reconstitute: “Si vous ne parvenez pas à articuler votre souffrance dans une structure bien définie, vous êtes foutus. [...] Croyez à la structure. Croyez aux métriques anciennes, également. La versification est un puissant outil de libération de la vie intérieure”.⁴⁰ The existence of poetry, for Houellebecq, is justified by the absence which the mother represents, but which poetry refuses to 'sign', that is, endorse or signify. Traditionally the art of the spoken word or song, the gap left by the poet's absence in its written form is here forgotten as the sin of the mother: the passage from orality to writing absolved and justified in the form of the letter which, in this mise-en-scène, the absence of the mother seems to necessitate.

³⁸ Houellebecq, “Rester vivant”, in *Rester vivant et autres textes*, 9-12 (p. 9).

³⁹ Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, p. 30.

⁴⁰ Houellebecq, “Rester vivant”, p. 9.

For Rousseau too, Derrida declares: “tout le mal vient de ce que “Les femmes ont cessé d'être mères ; elles ne le seront plus ; elles ne veulent plus l'être””.⁴¹ Thus the supplementary nature of writing in relation to speech, the absence, or gap introduced in writing's own deferral, is absolved in the scenario of the absent mother, who for Rousseau is the symbol of presence and unity in language above all else. Following a similar logic, Houellebecq's entire poetic oeuvre can be seen to arch towards the signification of this deferral, of this unanswered cry, also present in the description of Michel's childhood in *Les Particules*. In this scene, Marc, Michel's father, finds his son abandoned in his ex-partner's house: “Son fils rampait maladroitement sur le dallage, glissant de temps en temps dans une flaque d'urine ou d'excrément. Il clignait des yeux et gémissait continuellement. Percevant une présence humaine, il tenta de prendre la fuite.”⁴² The mother's absence is symbolized, in both Rousseau and Houellebecq, as a linguistic as well as a social and moral rupture. This particular scene can explain why the entire structure of the information society described in “Approches” rests not only on the elimination of the social mechanisms, but on the myth of the “natural woman” which the traditional family upholds.⁴³

Thus, beyond the pathos of this recurring scene and theme, Houellebecq's understanding of the function of language is clearly rooted in the moral architecture of writing's relationship to the voice, and to the deferral of presence. For, writing, Derrida continues:

est dangereuse dès lors que la représentation veut s'y donner pour la présence et le signe pour chose même. Et il y a une nécessité fatale, inscrite dans le fonctionnement même du signe, à ce que le substitut fasse oublier sa fonction de vicariance et se fasse passer pour la plénitude d'une parole dont il ne fait pourtant que suppléer la carence et l'infirmité.⁴⁴

In this context, what is exposed in Michel's scientific understanding of the self in *Les Particules*, is the vanity of the “I” which thinks of itself as being sovereign when it is merely living among the living. In his scientific works, Michel uses technology to return the self to the “good and natural” form of writing described by Derrida as the natural law of presence.

⁴¹ Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, p. 217.

⁴² Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, p. 30.

⁴³ In “Approches”, Houellebecq writes of consumer society's “machine sociale” : “Mai 68 n'a servi qu'à briser les quelques règles morales qui entravaient encore la voracité de son fonctionnement”. Michel Houellebecq, “Approches du désarroi”, p. 44.

⁴⁴ Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, pp. 206-207.

The self, written among the written, sign among all the other signs, is paradoxically returned to the unity of nature via technology.

In the context of our analysis of a humanist post-humanity in Houellebecq's texts, Michel's encounter with the *Book of Kells* in *Les Particules* takes on a particular significance. On the book, Derrida writes: "L'idée du livre, qui renvoie toujours à une totalité naturelle, est profondément étrangère au sens de l'écriture. Elle est la protection encyclopédique de la théologie et du logocentrisme contre la disruption de l'écriture, contre son énergie aphoristique et, nous le préciserons plus loin, contre la différence en général".⁴⁵ The book, for Derrida, exists beyond writing. It is an effort to contain the social destruction at work in language's deferral of presence. In this context, it is possible to read in the description attributed to Giraldus Cambrensis of the *Book of Kells* in *La Possibilité* an idealized version of the book's effort to contain and tame writing's social disruption:

Ce livre contient la concordance des quatre Evangiles selon le texte de saint Jérôme, et presque autant de dessins que de pages, tous ornés de couleurs merveilleuses. [...] En les regardant négligemment, en passant, on pourrait penser que ce ne sont que des barbouillages, plutôt que compositions soignées. On n'y verra rien de subtil, alors que tout est subtil. Mais si l'on prend la peine de les considérer très attentivement, de pénétrer du regard les secrets de l'art, on découvrira de telles complexités, si délicates et si subtiles, si étroitement serrées, entrelacées et nouées ensemble, et de couleurs si fraîches et si lumineuses, que l'on déclarera sans ambages que toute ces choses doivent résulter non de l'œuvre des hommes, mais des anges.⁴⁶

What Michel describes here is a book where language, at the image of the neo-humans in *La Possibilité*, has been 'returned' to a permanent state of immanence. A book without writing, in other words, where the possibility of disrupting the absolute presence of the divine law is entirely banished. Similarly, the narrative tale of post-humanity in Houellebecq's early works is, beyond the scientific aspect of cloning, the realization of a logocentric vision of language. Following and continuing the strictest humanist tradition of progress, in creating clones, Michel creates above all a book of life which contains and controls all the possibilities of existence. In this context, the terrain of techno-scientific neoliberalism described above proves to be a fertile ground for a return to the theological forms of governmentality Houellebecq explores in *La Possibilité* and later *Soumission*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴⁶ Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, pp. 300-301.

In his essay entitled *Foi et Savoir*, Jacques Derrida described the intertwining of techno-science and the reactivity of archaic forms of belonging, such as religion and nationalism. Both reactions could, he noted

aussi bien s'opposer que s'allier à une tradition démocratique: c'est ou bien le retour fervent à la citoyenneté nationale (patriotisme du chez soi sous toutes ses formes, attachement à l'Etat Nation, réveil du nationalisme ou de l'ethnocentrisme, le plus souvent alliés aux églises ou aux autorités du culte) ou bien, tout au contraire, la protestation universelle, cosmopolite ou œcuménique.⁴⁷

Regardless of their political orientation, both autoimmune reactions to what Derrida named "teletechnologies" are irredeemably tied to the apparatus they seek to dismantle.⁴⁸ While acknowledging this, I have tried to demonstrate the link between Houellebecq's early combative response to neoliberalism and the wider autoimmune relationship his works maintains with writing technologies and the media.

While Houellebecq's works lay bare the ideological workings of information society hiding under the mantle of a progressive humanism, they also reveal glimpses of a paranoid, or at least conspiratorial vision of technology which coincides with the dissemination of a protectionist mythology of "grand remplacement" in his later works and public interventions. Paying close attention to this rhetoric will show that Houellebecq's late call for the removal of parliamentary systems and the creation of direct democracy is framed by the ideology of presence inscribed in his poetic language.⁴⁹ Direct democracy's goal to bypass the plurality of parliamentary representation in order for the will of a winning majority to prevail among others echoes Houellebecq's strategy to eschew the dialogical formalism of the novel in favor of the more direct, pronounced essayistic style characterizing his later novels.⁵⁰ Yet, as we have seen, his reactionary discourses rely on the very liberal cultural channels of plurality, of writing and the media, to disseminate their anti-liberal message. As Derrida puts it, his anti-liberal voice is therefore caught in a double-bind:

⁴⁷ Derrida, *Foi et savoir* (Paris : Points, 1996), p. 87.

⁴⁸ Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies de la télévision* (Paris: Galilée, 1996).

⁴⁹ Houellebecq, "Après les attentats à Paris, quelle démocratie pour la France?", in *New York Times*, November 19th, < <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/20/opinion/michel-houellebecq-apres-les-attentats-a-paris-quelle-democratie-pour-la-france.html> > [last accessed 28/01/2019].

⁵⁰ As carefully dissected by Russell Williams in "Uncomfortable Proximity", *Soumission*: "appears less ambiguous and more consistent in terms of narrative voice than all of Houellebecq's previous fiction", p. 12.

“Il y va d’une Internationale qui, d’ailleurs, c’est la singularité de notre temps, ne peut se développer que sur les réseaux qu’elle combat, en utilisant les moyens de l’adversaire”.⁵¹

This, suffice to say, is a dangerous game; for in a bid to counter the worst effects of neoliberalism, Houellebecq seems ready to sacrifice the very communication channels allowing his provocations to emerge. These aesthetic and ideological phenomena need to be urgently examined in our contemporary culture if we do not want to run the risk of allowing our current freedoms to disappear under the spasms of democratic autoimmunity.

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⁵¹ Derrida, *Foi et savoir*, p. 87.